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THE WASHINGTON POST

Senate Slaps Mexico Over Antidrug Assistance

Economic Curbs Approved for Failure to Cooperate Fully With War Against Trafficking

By Helen Dewar
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The Senate last night defied veto threats from the White House and overwhelmingly approved economic sanctions against Mexico for failing to cooperate fully in U.S. antidrug efforts.

Brushing aside warnings that the vote could seriously damage U.S.-Mexican relations, the Senate voted 63 to 27 to reject President Reagan's certification of Mexico as complying with a 1986 law that threatens sanctions against countries that fall short in helping the U.S. fight against drug trafficking.

The penalties include a requirement that the United States oppose new loans from international development banks to countries that have been decertified and possible U.S. trade sanctions.

Foreign aid also would be curtailed, but Mexico receives none from the United States other than \$14.5 million in antidrug assistance that would not be affected.

The unexpectedly heavy vote against Mexico came after the Senate voted 54-to-40 vote earlier in the day against imposing similar penalties on the Bahamas, which the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had voted to punish earlier this week. By contrast, the committee had refused to recommend punishment for Mexico, splitting down the middle. A House subcommittee also has split evenly on Mexican sanctions.

If the House joins the Senate in approving the sanctions against Mexico, it would be the first country that Congress has decertified under the 1986 law.

Because of the veto threats and an escape clause in the 1986 law allowing the president to disregard sanctions that could adversely affect U.S. interests, sponsors of anti-Mexico move conceded the vote was largely symbolic and sanctions were unlikely to take effect even if approved by both houses.

But they urged approval of the measure in order to "send a message," as its chief sponsor, Sen. Pete Wilson (R-Calif.), put it, that

the United States is demanding better cooperation in narcotics eradication and interdiction efforts.

"This may be just the signal that Mexico needs to wake up before it's too late," said Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-N.Y.), another leading supporter of the measure.

But the administration contended the resolution could wind up doing more harm than good, and some senators suggested it amounted to an unwarranted search for scapegoats in the mounting "frenzy" over the nation's inability to control its own drug problems.

"We feel that attempts to overturn the president's certification would not only undermine the growing Mexican efforts in combating drugs, it could lead to even greater drug flows into the United States," said presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater.

There are also "broader national security interests of our two countries" that are at stake, including trade and immigration, Fitzwater said in noting that Reagan's advisers would recommend a veto if both houses pass the bill.

Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.), chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee on Western Hemisphere affairs, said he has been told Mexico might retaliate by rejecting the U.S. antidrug aid and suspending bilateral drug-control efforts.

Addressing Wilson and D'Amato, Sen. John S. McCain III (R-Ariz.) noted that California's "largest cash crop is marijuana" and suggested that New York, with its corruption problems, might wind up being decertified if the standards for foreign countries were applied to states.

Wilson cited Mexico for providing "safe havens" for drug traffickers, refusing to cooperate on narcotics-related financial information and turning down a U.S. request for unrestricted access to airspace for hot pursuit of suspected drug-carrying aircraft, among other things.

By voice vote, the Senate also voted to add Haiti to the list of countries that are to be scrutinized as drug production or transit sources but did not approve sanctions for Haiti.